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THEORIES OF INSPIRATION.

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The world an arena of wrestling antitheses—Theology, an effort to harmonize the antitheses of religion.—Theories of inspiration—Destructive theories; inspiration, confounded with revelation—with intuition—with illumination.—Verbal theories—of dictation—of infallible guidance.—Conceptual theories—ethical and religious inspiration—inspiration of the mysteries of religion—the Christ-theory.—Conclusion.

The universe is an arena of wrestling antitheses. It is constituted, one would be ready to say, of antithetic ideas and counteracting forces. They are the raw material of philosophy, religion and human life. They have preëmpted every field of knowledge and action. In the words of Jesus Sirach, "The works of God are two and two, one against the other."

We have such fundamental and comprehensive antitheses as matter and spirit, the natural and the supernatural, the phenomenal and the real. In psychology we have sensation and reflection, perception and conception, feeling and will, experience and intuition, reason and imagination. In ethics we have pleasure and duty, self-sacrifice and self-development, egoism and altruism. In philosophy, we have the absolute and the relative, form and substance, the real and the ideal, subject and object, freedom and necessity, liberty and law. In the natural world we have light and darkness, rest and motion, centripetal and centrifugal forces, integration and disintegration, life and death. In the social and civil world we have the individual and society, progress and conservatism, public spirit and private privilege; in the industrial world, labor and capital, production and consumption; in government, justice and mercy, centralization and popularization; in knowledge, empirical and rational, scientific and philosophic; in reasoning, analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction; in education, humanistic and utilitarian, ethical and æsthetical, religious and secular. In character we have initiative and insight,

fortitude and humility, virtue and vice, with many others which everyone will readily recall. *Here*, indeed, how often truth seems to be equivalent to the "balanced antithesis of errors." Thus self-control may be viewed as the yoke of reciprocity between indulgence and asceticism; self-respect as the mediation of inordinate self-assertion and sycophancy; courage as the reconciliation of timidity and rashness. We have such general antitheses as the positive and the negative, the yea and the nay, life and organization, thought and action, theory and practice. The unique power of the human hand lies in the opposition of the thumb and fingers, and the perpetuation of our physical life may be said to depend upon the effective counteraction of the jaws. The theme, in music, rests upon the antithesis of long and short sounds; and the sentence, in language, upon that of the noun and verb. In religion we have the antitheses of truth and grace, of sin and righteousness, of faith and reason, of zeal and knowledge; and underlying and embracing these, and many others, the fundamental and comprehensive one of the divine and the human.

Thus it seems evident that the universe, whatever else it is, is at least a system inlaid with antitheses—a complex of contrasts—a mighty fabric of oppositions. It is evident, also, that the task of thought, in such a universe, must consist largely in the effort to discover those higher principles of unity, in which its varied oppositions are harmonized, its wrestling antitheses reconciled.

When, therefore, we enter the sphere of theology we find that it consists, in large measure, of the effort of human thought to harmonize the antitheses of religion; and especially to discover the reconciliation in its doctrines of its fundamental and pervading antithesis of the divine and the human. Thus the mystery of the incarnation is the method of the union of the divine and human in the personality of our Lord; the mystery of regeneration is the method of the coöperation of the divine and human in the spiritual birth of the soul; the mystery of sanctification is the method of the divine and human co-action in the soul's growth in holiness; and the mystery of inspiration may be said to be the method of the coöperation of the divine Spirit with the human spirit in the production of the sacred Scriptures.

This introduction is perhaps too long; but the object has been simply to indicate in a general way what the problem of inspiration *is*; and more particularly its *place* in the world of thought; to outline its *external* relations before seeking to apprehend, in some measure, its *internal* relations.

It is evident that a problem of such interest and significance as the method and measure of coöperation respectively of the divine and the human in inspiration, would attract the study of many minds, and that the solutions proposed would be many and diverse. It is not the purpose of this article to propose a new solution of this problem; but to present merely a succinct statement or digest of the *principal types* or *classes of theories* which have been proposed by theological thinkers.

The *first* class of theories to which we give attention may be designated as nullifying, or destructive theories; since they, in effect, annul or abrogate a proper inspiration by confusing with it, or substituting for it, something else diverse from it. They render a distinctive inspiration superfluous, by supplanting it with a neutralizing conception.

Of this class, we notice, *first*, the theory which describes inspiration as the subjective effect merely of revelation. It has been customary to regard revelation as the supernatural communication of truth to the mind, and inspiration as such a supernatural illumination and control of the faculties of the recipient, as enables him adequately to apprehend and reproduce the truth so communicated.

If this be a true account of the distinction between revelation and inspiration, it seems evident that a view of the latter which explains it as the subjective effect merely of the former, merges inspiration in revelation, as its sufficient causal antecedent, and deprives it of any immediately supernatural character or function of its own. It seems evident that by this theory inspiration is not disengaged from revelation—there is no such thing as a distinctive and proper inspiration involving supernatural illumination and control in the reception and communication of revealed truth. The mind of the recipient is left to itself, to struggle, unaided, with the heavenly vision. There is revelation indeed,

but no divine interpreter to assist the finite faculties in grasping its transcendent materials. Neither is there any immediate divine guidance, or superintendence of prophet or apostle, in his effort to convey to others the things revealed.

The supernatural agency is viewed as occupied simply with the disclosure of truth, and not as directly influencing its appropriation by the recipient, or its subsequent reproduction for others. Such a theory, which reduces inspiration to an attribute merely of revelation, surrenders apparently any specific inspiration of the Scriptures, as such, and thus essentially nullifies and abrogates it.

A *second* theory which must be assigned to this class is that which confuses inspiration with intuition. This theory supposes the phenomena of inspiration to be accounted for by that natural elevation of the faculties which we call genius. The perception of ethical and religious truth by seer, prophet and apostle, is entirely analogous to the intuitive insight of poet and philosopher, and to the flash of scientific and inventive discovery. The spheres and the aptitudes, indeed, are diverse, but the agency and the process are identical. The human mind effects its conquests of religious and spiritual truth by the same means with which it wins its triumphs in science, art and philosophy. In these spheres, truth is wholly mediated by nature. The mind receives no immediate illumination or impulse from the divine mind. Its action does not transcend its inherent powers.

It is always dependent for its acquisitions upon natural phenomena. The world of nature and of history furnishes the materials of reflection, and intuition, in some favored moment, seizes their thrilling significance. In like manner it is conceived that truths of God and the soul, of faith and immortality, are the exquisite discoveries of religious genius. Inspiration is a high order of religious intuition. But the true conception of inspiration is not that of a mediated discovery of truth, but that of an illumination and impulse immediately communicated by the divine mind.

It seems evident, therefore, that this theory also explains inspiration by abrogating it.

A *third* theory which apparently belongs here may be designated as the theory of gracious inspiration. This theory confuses inspiration proper with that ordinary indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers, by which they are guided into the apprehension of such religious truth as will enable them to exhibit the fruits of practical piety. It is thought that the ordinary ministrations of the Holy Spirit, by which revealed truth is vitalized and gracious dispositions fostered in the heart, are not different in *kind* from that by which new truth is imparted and appropriated. Thus, growth in grace, or holiness, and inspiration are, in the last analysis, essentially one.

But it seems necessary to distinguish between an activity of the divine Spirit which merely helps receptivity and appropriation of that which is already revealed, and such an activity as imparts new truth and makes original communications to the mind. The distinction is as fundamental as that between the reason and the will, between an intellectual and an ethical process; and it is difficult to see how a theory which ignores it can logically attach to the Scriptures that idea of specific conveyance of original communications, which has been held by the great majority of believers to constitute the unique characteristic of the Holy Scriptures. Thus, in each one of these theories, the problem of the coöperation of the divine and human in inspiration is resolved by its virtual dismissal and nullification.

It is characteristic of the theories which we assign to the *second* class, that they emphasize the *divine* element in inspiration, and affirm *inerrancy* of the sacred writings. They are, in general, of two sorts, and are properly designated as verbal theories; for the reason that they represent the words of Scripture as invariably included, with more or less directness, in the inspiring act.

The *first* of these theories is usually designated as the theory of dictation. By this theory the subject of inspiration is sometimes represented as in an ecstasy, trance, or swoon, and sometimes as the amanuensis, pen, or harp, of the inspiring spirit, but always as the passive vehicle of the *words* of inspiration, which are conceived as transmitted through the medium of prophet or apostle, absolutely without error or modification by human elements.

This theory has been characterized sometimes as “mechanical,” because its view of inspiration is almost wholly objective, that of an immediate divine act, without any appreciable co-active agency on the part of man. The Scriptures are thus regarded as absolutely infallible in every respect, and transcendently divine. Thus Gaussen says: “The style of Moses, Ezekiel and Luke is the style of God;” and Tregelles says: “I believe the books of the Old and New Testament to be *verbally* the word of God, as absolutely as were the ten commandments written by the finger of God upon two tables of stone.” This theory expresses probably the rabbinical, the Alexandrian, the patristic and the scholastic view of inspiration. It is probable that it expresses also the prevailing view of the church at large, at least until modern criticism awakened doubts of its correctness. It expresses, certainly, what is confessedly true of portions, at least, of the Scriptures where God himself utters specific declarations, commandments, or prophecies. And yet it is doubtful whether this theory does not ignore, almost as entirely as the theories of the preceding class, the proper problem of inspiration, on account of its extreme repression of the human element in its jealous exaltation of the divine.

The *second* of the two contrasted verbal theories rejects the method of dictation and substitutes that of infallible guidance. Sometimes this theory has been designated “plenary,” as expressing the *full* inspiration of the sacred writings in *every part*, and sometimes “dynamic,” as expressing either the supernatural power by which the mind of the sacred writer is infallibly guided, or the natural power by which it coöperates with the supernatural in the infallible selection of *words* divinely approved. The mind of prophet and apostle is represented as exercising a spontaneous coöperation with the divine, but not such as to allow any human imperfection to mar the sacred writings—not such as to jeopardize, in any instance, the ultimate selection of the divinely approved words.

These are as absolutely secured as in the theory of dictation; but by a subtle and indescribable process of spiritual influence, suggestion, direction or superintendence, by which the mind is

infallibly guided to the choice of approved words, though the words themselves are not imparted. The process may perhaps be conceived as one of gradual elimination of improper words, by a series of supernatural *vetos*, until the mind rests at length in the precise words sanctioned by the inspiring spirit. There is no difference in result between this theory and the preceding one of dictation. The difference is in the process or method of effecting the result. In the former theory the words are viewed as conveyed; in this they are viewed as evoked. But, however produced, they are conceived as sanctioned by the divine mind; and the characteristic feature of both theories is, therefore, that *words* having the sanction of the inspiring spirit are infallibly secured, *and no error whatever* can be ascribed to the sacred writings. It is for this reason that we designate both theories verbal and inerrant, though some of the advocates of the latter view object to the designation "verbal." It may be observed here that the designations "deductive" and "*a priori*" so frequently applied in recent times to these theories do not characterize them either in their processes or results, but merely indicate their imputed ground in the presupposition that infallible accuracy in the minutest details *must characterize* a divinely accredited revelation. In the language, substantially, of a recent writer, the book of *God* must be *oracular* in all its parts and elements, infallible in every affirmation and representation.

We pass now to a class of theories which place greater emphasis upon the *human* element in inspiration, and admit unimportant errors in the sacred writings. They may be designated as conceptual theories, since their characteristic contention is that inspiration relates essentially to the *concept* and not to the *words*—to the material and not to the form. The human element is conceived as liberated. The natural powers of the mind are aided, indeed, and stimulated in their efforts to grasp and reproduce the substance of revelation, but the sacred writers are not limited in their *forms of expression*. Just as the advocates of the theory of infallible guidance do not deem verbal dictation necessary to the adequate expression of revealed truth, so, in turn, conceptualists disincline to condition the verities of rev-

elation upon the divine authorization and infallible accuracy of *all* its verbal forms. The trustworthiness and authority of the sacred Scriptures are not believed by them to be dependent upon prescribed forms of expression. The thought or concept rather than the words, constitutes the essence of inspiration. And whatever view may be entertained of the inter-relation of thought and language, experience proves that a given concept may receive different and even, in unimportant respects, *defective* forms of expression without impairing its essential integrity.

Conceptual theories are susceptible of a *threefold division*. We consider *first* the theory of ethical and religious inspiration. This theory is derived in large measure from a consideration of the *great end* of inspiration, which is confessedly ethical and religious. This great end, therefore, will determine its method and scope. The Scriptures evince abundantly, indeed, their inspiration in all that relates directly to ethical and religious teaching and to representations, especially, of the kingdom of God. Such other materials as they contain are wholly incidental to these and may naturally exhibit signs of human imperfection, but *relatively to their great end* of imparting ethical and religious truth—of subserving the progress of the kingdom of God—they are without error. In respect to all that is germane to this, their supreme and essential purpose, they are an infallible guide, though their incidental details cannot be assured. In the language of Tholuck, "The Bible, as we have it, cannot, in any case, be held to be verbally inspired, and hence the contents of Scripture, *in all its details*, cannot be regarded as externally guaranteed." Thus incidental allusions in Scripture, such as Paul's message to Carpus to send him "the cloak" which he "left at Troas," with "the parchments," and poetical quotations, like the song of Lamech, and the apostrophe to the sun and moon in Joshua, from the book of Jasher, and the patriotic strains in which Deborah praises the subtlety of Jael in the murder of Sisera, need not be regarded as inspired. Indeed, the advocates of this theory insist that the Scriptures may contain errors in science and history, without prejudice to their representations of God, the soul and immortality. They may naturally exhibit

chronological, geological and astronomical mistakes, as irrelevant to the great ethical and religious ends of inspiration. In the quaint language of one writer, "The Bible teaches how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go." God, who is intent on salvation and the triumph in man of the principles of the divine kingdom, must be viewed as relatively indifferent to errors in secular matters, and cannot be thought of as turning aside from his great and absorbing object to correct a grammatical or topographical inaccuracy. Indeed, the *facts*, it is maintained, require this theory. For there are, as a matter of fact, many acknowledged, though unimportant, errors in the Bible, and this theory, it is believed, furnishes the true reconciliation of this incontestable fact, with the infallible authority of the Scriptures in those essential matters which relate to faith, duty and salvation. The Bible "*contains*" the word of God; to affirm that it "*is*" the word of God throughout and in all the minutiae of its representations is simply to disregard the undeniable characteristics which its pages exhibit.

To these views, verbalists reply, acknowledging the presence of errors in the Bibles which we *now have*, but contend that these errors are due to the mistakes of copyists, translators, and printers, and that the *original autographs* of the sacred texts were wholly free from error.

But to this conceptualists rejoin that the absolute inerrancy of the original autographs is an unscientific assumption, incapable of proof, since the original autographs are *lost*, and can never be recovered; while, on the other hand, the accredited principles of textual and literary criticism indicate the almost certain presence of some, at least, of these errors in the original autographs; and that the assumption itself is an afterthought of the verbalists, to which, on the one hand, they have been driven by their forced recognition of errors in the existing text; and, on the other hand, lured by their presupposition that a divine revelation must of necessity be characterized by infallible accuracy. They contend, furthermore, that no *sufficient reason* can be assigned for the existence of inerrant autographs, which does not require inerrancy, also, in the Bibles which we *now have*; since but a few of

the early Christians ever *saw* the original autographs, while the multitude of believers through all the centuries of the church's history have been obliged to depend—and *not in vain*—upon Bibles which have not been wholly free from error. If an absolutely inerrant New Testament, they ask, was necessary for the first generation of Christians, why was it not at least equally necessary for each succeeding generation of Christians? For these reasons, it is regarded by conceptualists extremely unwise, not to say fanatical, to insist upon a theory of inspiration which requires one to say, with an eminent verbalist, "One proved error in the Holy Scriptures would *invalidate the claims of revelation*."¹

A *second* conceptual theory may be designated as inspiration of the mysteries of religion. Advocates of this view doubt the adequacy of the preceding theory to explain all the imperfections due to the presence of the human element in the Scriptures, and believe that additional features must be referred to this element. In their opinion, inspiration must be further restricted to those things which are *not discoverable by human reason*, such as the nature of God, the incarnation, the resurrection and the future life. It is believed that a considerable part of the ethical and religious teaching of the Scriptures is but a reaffirmation of the intuitions of reason, and of the deductions of experience; as is evidenced, indeed, by the presence of these elements in inculcations of other religions. Thus it is thought unnecessary to ascribe precepts of truthfulness, honesty, temperance, courtesy, hospitality and natural affection to inspiration. Especially it is believed to *imperil* inspiration to ascribe to it the ethical and religious sanctions, expressed or implied, of the cruelties practiced upon the Canaanites; the dire vengeance implored by the psalmist upon his enemies; and the bitter destruction represented as actually wrought by Queen Esther and her people upon their enemies. These and other similar characteristics must certainly have their origin, not in inspiration, but in the imperfections of the human heart. And why, too, it

¹Some theorists incline to limit inspiration to the ethical and religious elements in the Bible, but regard *these elements* as *verbally* inspired. Such a composite or eclectic theory belongs naturally to those minor varieties, which, whatever their merits, could not be embraced, conveniently, in a brief outline like the present.

is asked, should a love-song like Canticles, too oriental in coloring for ethical appropriation by occidental Christians, and the morbid pessimism of a book like Ecclesiastes, be ascribed to inspiration? It seems evident, therefore, for these and other reasons, that the divine element in the Scriptures cannot be wisely extended beyond those mysteries which the natural reason cannot penetrate, and, for the knowledge of which we are obviously indebted to supernatural agency.

Conceptualists of a *third* class circumscribe the sphere of inspiration within still narrower limits, and propose what may be designated the *Christ-theory*, as characterized, not unlike the so-called "Christ-party" in the church at Corinth, by a peculiar preëminence ascribed to the *personal* teaching of our Lord. Advocates of this view distrust the absolute accuracy of some of the representations made by other sacred authorities, even in the higher ranges of Scripture truth. Prophetic and apostolic conceptions, even here, may be defective, and apostolic reasoning, in these high altitudes, is quite certainly sometimes untrustworthy. The erroneous inferences which the apostles drew from Christ's words, to the effect that his return was to be expected during the lifetime of their own generation, indicate that even inspired men falter in their efforts to attain the summits of revelation. The allegory in the letter to the Galatians is essentially rabbinical, or Alexandrian, and has no universal significance. The correspondence between Adam and Christ, parenthetically instituted by the apostle in the letter to the Romans, is, probably, a misconception, due to necessarily imperfect knowledge of anthropology, and ignorance of the law of evolution. There is reason to believe that, in some minor respects, even the reports of our Lord's utterances, somewhat variously recorded by the evangelists—who, indeed, themselves make no claim to inspiration, but only to faithful narration—are susceptible of correction. These peculiarities need not, however, embarrass us. We need remember only that revelation is manifestly progressive,—“by divers portions and in divers manners”—and respects Christ's law of parsimony;—“I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.” Let it suffice us that enough of the clear

light of revealed truth is given to convince each docile generation of sin and righteousness, and to guide the sincere spirit in the way of life. Let it be borne in mind, however, that the criterion of discrimination, in all instances, is the infallible norm of *Christ's characteristic teaching*, as apprehended by the Christian consciousness. To this supreme arbitrament, all revelation—prophecy, poetry, history and epistle—must be brought for comparison and characterization. In a word, so much of the Bible is inspired as can be shown to accord with the accredited teachings of Jesus Christ.

It is, perhaps, difficult to avoid regarding this theory as semi-rationalistic, on account of its qualified view of apostolic authority. Its friends contend, however, that when the theory of absolute apostolic authority has been sufficiently modified by the customary method of variously explaining away peculiar apostolic precepts, opinions and inferences, the theory is no longer a commanding one; and it is believed to be both simpler in method, and truer to the facts, to admit at once that *absolute* authority can attach alone to the *personal* teaching of our Lord.

A discreet rabbi wrote, "Teach thy lips to say I do not know." I do not think I have ever known *how* the Scriptures were inspired. I have read in them statements which seem to me to affirm the *fact* of their inspiration, as, for example: "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets, by divers portions and in divers manners, hath, at the end of these days, spoken unto us in his Son" (Heb. 1:1). "Every Scripture inspired of God," or, as we may render it, "Every *God-breathed* Scripture is, also, profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). I believe I have observed in the Scriptures, in human lives, characteristics which prove the truth of those declarations, and others like them. Yet, after a fresh study of the subject, in the most recent writings of the ablest theorists at home and abroad, I am, I think, no surer than ever before *how* the Scriptures were inspired; but I believe they are, in *fact* inspired; and I humbly trust that if I make some systematic and persistent effort to conform my life to the implications of such a faith, I shall, by the grace of God, be saved.